Ogeechee Technical College integrates certification courses in degree tracks to turn out new breed of IT pros

Ogeechee Technical College in Statesboro, Georgia, wants to be known for producing top-quality graduates with top-notch technical skills and a strong work ethic. To that end, the school's flagship computer information systems (CIS) program ranks first statewide in industry-recognized technology certifications, which are proving to be a sound path to promising IT careers. Ogeechee Tech incorporates Microsoft® IT Academy Program resources into its academic tracks to strengthen its program. Association with the Microsoft name has also helped recruit more talented students.

Education needs

As the world becomes ever more interconnected by technology, colleges are moving to meet the rising demand for graduates with IT expertise. Because an increasingly varied set of organizations in today's work world need technology skills and IT support, traditional computer science classes no longer suffice. The graduates most in demand for jobs are those with expertise in a variety of IT programs.

This trend has led Ogeechee Technical College to view its mission as broader in scope than vocational schools of the past. Besides providing students with the best possible instruction in IT skills, Ogeechee Tech strives for more far-reaching objectives such as teaching them how to become more valued employees.

"First and foremost, our goal is to prepare students for the work force by providing them with hands-on technology skills and a basic knowledge set to go along with those skills," says Terry Hand, Ogeechee Tech CIS instructor. "But another goal we push adamantly is developing a strong work ethic, which includes the ability to work as teams and be leaders. We're trying to graduate a new type of IT person for a new type of IT world."

Classes in the CIS program offer customized training in technical skills as well as preparation for industry certification to help students learn to implement, manage, secure, and maintain computer networks. Hand is a strong advocate of certification because he understands its value to students and employers. College degrees impart a certain amount of prestige, he says, but in the IT work force, certifications carry special weight. Employers see them as a true indicator of a person's knowledge and skill set. With that in mind, the CIS program aims to turn out the most students possible with the certifications the workplace demands.

Customer: Ogeechee Technical College

Web site: www.ogeecheetech.edu

Number of students: 2,000

Number of faculty: 80

Number of staff: 82

Location: Georgia, United States

Industry: Education

Customer profile

Established in 1986, Ogeechee Technical College is a public two-year technical institute specializing in educational programs and services that promote economic growth and community development. Its computer and information systems program enrolls an average of 220 students annually.

Software and services

Microsoft IT Academy Program

Microsoft®

Solution

To help CIS students prepare for certification, Ogeechee Tech integrates Microsoft IT Academy Program resources with its academic degree and diploma tracks. As a Microsoft IT Academy member, Ogeechee Tech enjoys access to training, Microsoft software licenses, discounts on courseware, and certification exams. Membership benefits also include early information about the latest technologies and hands-on experience that leads to industry certification.

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>
> *—Terry Hand*
> *CIS instructor,*
> *Ogeechee Technical College*

"I'm a big believer that students need adequate training to be effective as network technicians or administrators," Hand says. "Such training must include the development of a strong skill set, including knowledge and hands-on performance training. Technical colleges are well known for providing such training, and Ogeechee Tech is well known for preparing students for industry-standard certifications, such as the Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) certificate."

Ogeechee Tech is currently the top-ranked school in Georgia with regard to IT certification, including Microsoft certifications such as MCP and Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator, as well as CompTIA certifications such as A+, Network+, and Security+.

In 2007, 42 students in the CIS program earned certifications, a number the school hopes to double in 2008. Hand credits a partnership with Georgia Southern University for part of the rise. GSU students working on four-year degrees who run into difficulty finding jobs can take CIS classes at Ogeechee Tech and get hands-on training or prepare for certifications.

The pass rate for certifications among Ogeechee Tech CIS students is near 90 percent—higher than most technology "boot camps" offered in Georgia. Hand attributes the strong showing to 10-week classes that feature a high-octane mix of hands-on activities, lectures, and test preparation, followed by a free three-hour training seminar that gives students an extra boost before their certification exams.

Benefits

Students at Ogeechee Tech hope to get not only good training but also a good job. The school takes that further by steering them toward careers with opportunities for advancement. That's why Hand pushes hard on certification: he's convinced it's the best path available to help CIS graduates land a strong position, grow faster in their careers, and earn a better income.

Improving employability

Ogeechee Tech students who are getting good jobs and good salary offerings provide evidence that the model is working. Graduates of the CIS program over the past several years have achieved 100 percent job placement, including positions at CNN and Comcast. "Now more than ever, the power of their successful training is showing," Hand says. "Large organizations are coming to the technical college system because they know we're producing not only hands-on trained people but also certified people."

Enhancing educational quality

The emphasis on quality has helped Ogeechee Tech produce graduates with the required skills for today's IT industry. The school is turning out qualified IT professionals who can help companies troubleshoot, maintain, and secure their networks, which can lead to economic and business benefits for those companies. Hand says the Microsoft IT Academy Program has had a definite impact on Ogeechee Tech's ability to produce quality graduates. "The discounts on certifications, the software acquisition benefits, and the other resources that come with being a member have helped us enhance the quality of our classes and the quality of our classroom experience," he says. "I believe in the current benefits of the Microsoft IT Academy Program, but I also believe in the potential of what it can do for the state of Georgia."

Attracting talented students

Like many technical colleges, Ogeechee Tech struggles to overcome the perceptions of prospective students who view it in the same light as the vocational schools their parents attended, rather than as a two-year educational institution that emphasizes education, technical, and work force skills. The association with Microsoft imparts a significant amount of validation, Hand says, leading to a better understanding of the type of students the college is producing. "There's respect and knowledge around what Microsoft IT Academy means," Hand says. "The power behind the Microsoft IT Academy name has helped us recruit more quality students, which allows us to do what we do best: train them."

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